



U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services

STATEMENT

OF

**EDUARDO AGUIRRE, JR.
DIRECTOR**

**U.S. CITIZENSHIP AND IMMIGRATION SERVICES
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HOMELAND SECURITY**

REGARDING A HEARING ON

**“BACKLOG REDUCTION PLAN
FOR IMMIGRATION APPLICATIONS”**

BEFORE THE

**SUBCOMMITTEE ON IMMIGRATION, BORDER SECURITY
AND CLAIMS
HOUSE COMMITTEE ON THE JUDICIARY**

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Good afternoon Chairman Hostettler, Ranking Member Jackson Lee and Members of the Subcommittee. Today I will report to you the progress that U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Service (USCIS) has made in its initial fourteen months and the ambitious goals that we will reach in the months and years ahead. The Backlog Elimination Plan submitted to Congress this week reaffirms USCIS commitment to eliminating the backlog. This commitment is not just one of words, but one of action. Since my appointment and confirmation as the first-ever Director of USCIS, I have worked closely with the leaders in USCIS to immediately review our processes, identify opportunities for streamlining and further improvement, and begin to implement meaningful change.

To say that this has been a year of change for this agency would be an understatement of great proportions. In the past fourteen months, USCIS has brought together components of the former Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) to create a new, energized, cohesive agency with a single vision:

“Provide the right benefit to the right person in the right amount of time, and prevent the wrong person from accessing immigration benefits”

USCIS is committed to building and maintaining an organization that provides immigration information and benefits in a timely, accurate, consistent, courteous, and professional manner. It is this fundamental mission that guides USCIS as it faces the challenges of a new era.

The Backlog Elimination Plan focuses on three objectives:

- *Achieve a high-level of performance* by establishing clear, concrete milestones and actively monitoring progress towards these milestones;
- *Transform business practices* by implementing significant information technology improvements and identifying processing improvements to transform the current way of doing business; and,
- *Ensure integrity* by instituting comprehensive quality assurance measures.

USCIS will increase its focus on information technology to ensure that long-term Backlog Reduction is sustained, customer service is improved, new fee for service business models are enabled, and a technology environment is deployed to support new processes and workflow aligned with the DHS mission and Presidential mandate for eGov standards.

These objectives have started USCIS in the right direction and have begun to deliver improvements, but there is much more to be done. Just as the backlog was created over time, we must recognize that there is no quick fix to all our challenges – only through our commitment will we be able to claim success.

Thankfully, we have the opportunity, the leadership, and the talent to make an impact. By the end of 2006, we will eliminate the application backlog and

achieve six-month cycle times, and in doing so will deliver on the President's vision of "*welcoming immigrants with open arms...not endless lines.*"

Accomplishments to Date

During the short time I have been honored to lead the men and women of USCIS, we have accomplished much. We have:

- Created a new organization and self-standing structure with a leadership team;
- Re-energized and redirected the legacy INS benefits workforce of 10,000 government and 5,000 contract employees;
- Created a customer-oriented culture incorporating Dignity, Respect and Ingenuity as core values;
- Established a new Office of Citizenship;
- Launched the USCIS Website;
- Established separate goals within the DHS strategic plan;
- Created a new Refugee Officer Corps;
- Streamlined the certificate of citizenship process for adopted children;
- Naturalized 670,000 new citizens;
- Welcomed over one million new immigrants;
- Initiated on-line case status and processing status updates;
- Initiated on-line filings for 8 applications forms, representing over 50% of the total volume of benefit applications annually;
- Created and began national implementation of a web-based information appointment system (InfoPass);
- Expanded the customer service line to overseas callers;
- Revised the fee schedule;
- Initiated four pilot projects aimed at improving customer service and reducing backlogs;
- Established the Office of Fraud Detection and National Security to be responsible for working with the appropriate law enforcement entities in responding to national security hits on aliens who pose a threat and for identifying systemic fraud in the application process; and,
- Revised the Backlog Elimination Plan that includes measurable milestones to gauge progress toward backlog elimination goals.

All this has been accomplished in the context of the work we do every day:

- Process 140,000 national security background checks;
- Receive 100,000 web hits;
- Take 50,000 calls at our Customer Service Centers;
- Adjudicate 30,000 applications for immigration benefits;
- See 25,000 visitors at 92 field offices;
- Issue 20,000 green cards; and
- Capture 8,000 sets of fingerprints and digital photos at 130 Application Support Centers; and,
- Receive 450 Freedom of Information Act requests.

Backlog Elimination Plan

The backlog of applications is a serious problem and until very recently, growing.

Early in 2001, President Bush charged the INS with reducing the processing times for benefits applications to less than six months. The President proposed funding of \$500 million to achieve and maintain this ambitious goal.

It is important to understand the magnitude of this challenge. Backlogs of immigration benefit applications began to grow during the 1990s. Overall, there was a 77% increase from FY 1993 to FY 2001. The primary factors contributing to the backlogs were a dramatic increase in the number of applications and petitions received, delays in adjusting our fees and filling positions to process this increasing number of applications, the lengthy amount of time it takes to recruit, hire and train adjudicators, and the lack of a comprehensive approach to monitoring, supporting and maintaining timely processing.

The original Backlog Elimination Plan drafted in response to the President's initiative was intended to serve as the foundation for a renewed backlog elimination effort. However, the tragic events of September 11, 2001 and the resulting focus on national security, including the National Security Entry Exit Registration System (NSEERS) Program and enhanced background checks on processing of all immigration benefits applications, posed additional challenges to achieving a six-month cycle time standard for all applications.

Nevertheless, the USCIS is on track to meet its goals to eliminate the backlog by the end of 2006. The Backlog Elimination Plan will:

- Report on the current size of the application backlog;
- Identify the next steps to eliminate the backlog and achieve a six-month or less cycle time target for all forms by the end of 2006;
- Establish annual production goals; and,
- Provide a plan to measure progress through quarterly reports and on-line information available on each district office and service center.

USCIS defines the backlog as the number of cases that exceed their cycle time. Naturalization and adjustment of status, for instance, have a 6-month cycle time while applications for nonimmigrant workers, change of status, and employment authorization have shorter 3-month cycle-time targets.

USCIS calculates the current backlog, based on cases exceeding these cycle times, to be approximately 3.4 million cases as of the end of 2003. The inclusion

of Asylum Division cases raises the backlog to about 3.7 million cases out of a total pending of about 6.1 million cases.

The Way Ahead

We fully realize that the increased funding requested in the budget alone will not enable us to realize our goals. We must fundamentally change the way we conduct our business. We are aggressively working to modernize our systems and increase our capacity through the reengineering of processes, the development and implementation of new information technology systems, and the development of mechanisms to interact with customers in a more forward-reaching manner.

Given current data on the backlog, productivity, and workload, USCIS must achieve a 19.6% increase in non-Asylum production to achieve cycle time goals and eliminate the backlog by the end of 2006. In addition, the Asylum Division must realize a 3% increase in production in order to achieve the same result.

In order to achieve these productivity increases, USCIS will:

- Reengineer processes and automate manual workflow processes to achieve greater efficiencies;
- Update policies and procedures to streamline adjudications and increase the percentage of cases completed at initial review by an adjudicator;
- Manage production against milestones – beginning with collaboratively setting goals, reporting progress, and identifying additional improvement opportunities; and,
- Work with the Office of the Ombudsman on pilot projects to test alternative processing approaches and new applications of proven off-the-shelf technology.

USCIS has already begun to show progress in this direction during the first six months of this fiscal year. Production is up, pending and backlog figures are down. We have begun to make progress by instituting the first of several Good Government Initiatives designed to reduce the number of times an application is handled, and through the efforts of every employee rededicating himself or herself to the task at hand.

USCIS has begun an aggressive process redesign effort in the following areas:

Card Issuance – By the end of the month we plan to publish an interim final rule to allow ourselves to issue Employment Authorization Documents (EADs) for periods greater than 1 year. Over time this will enable us to eliminate the unnecessary repetition of applications for renewed cards.

Expediting the adjudication of easy applications – With green card renewals we will utilize technology to search databases to provide critical information, i.e. status verifications and background checks, so that in this way the adjudication is a simple yes or no based on that information.

Requests For Evidence (RFEs) -- Recognizing the costs, of both time and human capital in the processing of RFEs, we have been working to eliminate the need for unnecessary RFEs. Some of this improvement has been accomplished by memoranda, such as the recently issued memorandum advising adjudicators that in most cases it is not necessary to request updates of financial information that was current at the time of filing. Other improvement requires regulatory changes that are being drafted.

In the months ahead, USCIS will:

- Enhance data-sharing and inter-agency process improvements to eliminate steps in the processes that add little or no value;
- Modify regulations to clarify requirements for adjudicators and for applicants;
- Reduce pending Asylum cases that have been likely abandoned or overcome by other events;
- Use systems capabilities to run batch queries against data systems rather than spending time manually checking systems; and,
- Continue to manage production against targets.

But we have further to go. The weeks and months ahead are key to continuing this positive trend and making the successes we have realized become the new baseline for the bureau rather than temporary blips on a production chart.

USCIS will ensure that all customers are provided an opportunity to receive a decision within six months or less. However, we recognize that even after the backlog is eliminated, some cases may take longer than six months, such as those cases where security checks have indicated a possible significant terrorist risk or criminal activity.

Maintaining National Security

But let me be perfectly clear about one thing. Productivity gains will not be at the expense of our National Security responsibilities. USCIS clearly understands its responsibilities to the Department of Homeland Security, the Congress, the President and the American people. Compromising on National Security is not an option.

In addition to enhanced security checks, USCIS understands that maintaining national security and deterring fraud are critical elements of its mission. To process these workloads, USCIS has established the Office of Fraud Detection and National Security (FDNS) to be responsible for working with the appropriate

law enforcement entities in responding to national security hits on aliens who pose a threat and for identifying systemic fraud in the application process.

This component, in cooperation with U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), will screen, identify, and refer cases involving suspected fraud and threats to public safety or national security to ICE for field investigation and enforcement action. Anti-fraud efforts will include developing standard operating procedures to aid field Adjudications staffs in identifying suspected fraud. These initiatives will better enable USCIS to identify applications that may involve fraud, deny benefits to aliens who commit fraud, and place those aliens in removal proceedings.

Conclusion

USCIS is committed to this goal and will work cooperatively with our stakeholders, including Congress, to see it to its successful completion.

During our first year, USCIS stood up an organization of which we are very proud. We have established a leadership team, improved many of our operational processes, and continue to strive to make further improvements.

The progress that we have made and the reputation we hope we have built over the past fourteen months will provide the momentum for continued success in the months and years ahead.

This concludes my prepared remarks. I thank you for the invitation to testify before this subcommittee and I would be happy to answer any questions.